

VZCZCXRO2391
OO RUEHAG
DE RUEHDM #1695/01 1031238
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 131238Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8323
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0009
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 001695

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/13/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV EU SY

SUBJECT: EU DIPLOMATS SEE A CROSSROADS ON STRATEGY TOWARD SARG

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: European diplomats posted to Syria are increasingly questioning what they perceive as the EU policy of isolating the SARG. Some diplomats, especially those from Spain, Italy and Greece, but also from countries such as the Netherlands and Austria, point to the regime's increased ties to Iran, Hamas and even Russia and question the long-term costs of these ties to Europe's political and cultural interests. The SARG's recent harder-line stance toward the Europeans, including its refusal to apologize after angry crowds burned the Danish and Norwegian embassies, the closing of the European-funded civil society center and its response to a confidential April 11 EU demarche to the SARG, is only increasing the doubts of diplomats about the correctness of their governments' approach to Syria. As one European diplomat told us recently, "We're at a crossroads. We need to decide whether to follow the hard-line U.S. approach and undermine further our relationship with our near-neighbor Syria, or whether we should engage the SARG in the hopes of achieving future political and economic reforms that eventually make it more like Europe." End Summary.

¶2. (C) EU DIPLOMATS SEE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF ISOLATION: European diplomats posted to Syria are increasingly questioning what they perceive as the EU policy of isolating the SARG. Over the past several weeks, Poloff has met with diplomats from 11 of the 17 EU countries represented in Syria, including colleagues from Spain, Italy, Greece, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and the Slovak Republic. To varying degrees, all of them indicated their growing unease about the effectiveness of the EU's current policy toward the SARG, even as Damascus eagerly flaunts proof of its flourishing ties with Iran, Hamas and even Russia. As one European diplomat told us April 12, the same day that former Iranian President Rafsanjani arrived in Damascus, "If you look at our cables from a year ago, they were predicting that the strategy of isolation would push Syria toward Iran and Hamas, and that's what has happened."

¶3. (C) Added to that, the EU diplomats point to signs that the UNIIIC investigation could drag on for another two years without ever producing conclusive answers as to who assassinated former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri. "We're just standing by and watching, wasting time," said one Italian diplomat, who specifically pointed to increased Iranian and Russian influence in Syria. "I wish we'd had the courage to do what Spain did with the Moratinos visit," said the diplomat, referring to Spanish FM Moratinos' March 7 "refueling stop" that included a meeting with Syrian FM Mu'allim. Some diplomats also expressed fears that continued

pressure on Syria would only add to regional instability (and illegal immigration to Europe) and further complicate the likelihood of Middle East peace.

¶4. (C) SARG TURNS BACK ON EUROPE: Fueling doubts among diplomats about the EU policy of isolating the SARG is the regime's recently harder-line stance toward Europeans, including its initially brusque response over the February 4 damage at the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish embassies. While some European diplomats still express doubts about the likelihood of direct SARG involvement in burning of the embassies, most said that the reaction to the cartoons increased the urgency for more dialogue between Europe and the Muslim world, including with Muslims in secular countries like Syria. "The burning of the embassies was a wake-up call," said a Danish diplomat, calling the incident a sign of boiling Muslim resentment to perceived European arrogance and disrespect. Spain, Italy and Greece see themselves as best positioned for such a dialogue, given their historical, geographic and religious ties to the region, according to several interlocutors.

¶5. (C) Diplomats also see evidence of a more confrontational SARG stance in the March 1 closure of the European Commission-funded civil society training center and the SARG's chilly response to a confidential April 11 EU demarche on human rights issues. The SARG reportedly advised the EU about licensing requirements for any training centers, promised to investigate alleged detentions and disappearances, and ended with the comment that "it could deal with the Europeans once the Association Agreement was signed." Results of the EU demarche are likely to be discussed by the capitals next week, said a European diplomat.

DAMASCUS 00001695 002 OF 002

¶6. (C) A CROSSROADS IN POLICY: Although none of the diplomats who met with Poloff anticipated a dramatic shift in EU policy anytime soon, most of them expressed anxiety about the current policy. As one European diplomat told us recently, "We're at a crossroads. We need to decide whether to follow the hard-line U.S. approach and undermine further our relationship with our neighbor Syria, or whether we should engage the SARG in the hopes of achieving long-term political and economic reforms that eventually make it more like Europe." A Czech diplomat saw it differently, calling for continued pressure but with greater U.S.-EU policy coordination to foil SARG manipulation. The regime sees Europe as a viable alternative to the U.S., said the diplomat, who linked the SARG's initial interest in the Association Agreement to increased U.S. pressure on Syria.

¶7. (C) Comment: EU diplomats here are clearly uncomfortable with their current policy toward the SARG, which they see at out of sync with their cultural, commercial and political long-term interests. Many feel exposed by the relatively weak response from European governments after the Danish and Norwegian embassies were burned. Many have also concluded that the SARG felt free to use Islamic cover to lash out at the Europeans and remind them that there could be costs associated with adopting the U.S. policy of isolating Syria and slow-rolling to death the Association Agreement. These diplomats seem to recognize, however, that the EU, except for the odd maverick move by a Moratinos, cannot embark on a fresh policy course with Syria until the completion of the UNIIIC investigation.

SECHE